

# Online News Qualitative Research Report

Media Plurality Phase 3

Ipsos & Ofcom

# Contents

**Introduction** (*starting Slide 3*)

**Cohort 1 – Follow Public Service Broadcasters** (*starting Slide 10*)

**Cohort 2 – Follow Counter-attitudinal News Sources** (*starting Slide 25*)

**Cohort 3 – News Diet Review** (*starting Slide 36*)

**Cohort 4 - Trust Score Browser Extension** (*starting Slide 46*)

# Introduction

Ipsos were commissioned by Ofcom to conduct a **qualitative experiment** to explore the impact of four different treatments designed to improve the breadth and quality of news consumed on social media.

The study followed the news consumed on Facebook by **44 participants (11 in each cohort)** across a period of **6 weeks** between July and August 2023. Facebook was selected for this exploratory study due to the prominence it holds in the social media news marketplace.

The design blended **qualitative interviews** with **passive observations** to:

- A) better understand current news consumption behaviours on social media; and
- B) explore how peoples' online news consumption behaviours changed (or not) in response to each treatment.

Participants were **split into one of four 'cohorts'**, each of whom was given a different 'treatment task' designed to encourage participants to consider the news outlets they engage with on Facebook. The selection of treatments was inspired by previous research by Ro'ee Levy which found that counter-attitudinal news on Facebook reduced affective polarisation.\*

This report provides an overview of the experience of, and impact on, participants across each cohort.

**Cohort 1**  
Follow Public Service  
Broadcasters (PSBs)

**Cohort 2**  
Follow Counter-  
Attitudinal News  
Sources

**Cohort 3**  
News Diet Review

**Cohort 4**  
Trust Score Browser  
Extension

# Recruitment and sampling

The study captured, in-depth, the lived experience of a **small qualitative sample**.

Each cohort contained only 11 participants. As such, the results should be seen as **explorative**, and **indicative only**. The results are not generalisable to a wider population.

Recruitment took place using a **recruitment screener**. The screener ensured that in each cohort the right baseline behaviours and attitudes were present for the treatment task to be relevant and effective. Details of this are below.

All participants were active Facebook users and reported social media as their most regularly used source to look at news. Each cohort also had a mix of age, gender, social grade, and location.

The table presented below shows the **specific sampling requirements for each cohort**.

<b>Cohort 1</b> <b>Follow PSBs</b>	<b>Cohort 2</b> <b>Follow Counter-Attitudinal News Sources</b>	<b>Cohort 3</b> <b>News Diet Review</b>	<b>Cohort 4</b> <b>Trust Score Browser Extension</b>
All participants self-reported seeing either 'Not very much' or 'No content at all' from PSBs on their social media newsfeeds.	People who say they are either left-wing or right-wing.	Mix of people who consume news from alternative/non-mainstream media organisations and those consuming mainstream news sources.	All participants who agreed to use a browser extension to display trust score on search engines during the research.
<b>Recruited:</b> x11 who say they do not consume much/any news from PSBs (Online).	<b>Recruited:</b> At least x5 (of 11) who self-identified as 'left wing'. At least x5 (of 11) who self-identified as 'right wing'.	<b>Recruited:</b> x6 (of 11) who say they consume news from alternative/non-mainstream media organisations.	<b>Recruited:</b> At least x6 (of 11) who say they consume alternative/ non-mainstream media organisations.

# Method: multi-faceted longitudinal research design

The **primary sources** of data were **in-depth interviews, pre and post treatment surveys** and a **media diary** with research participants.



However, ‘**self-reporting**’ of social media news consumption is subject to poor/inaccurate recall and potential bias. The study therefore sought to **triangulate** the qualitative and quantitative participant-derived survey/depth interview data with additional sources of recorded/downloaded data. These included:

- **Optical Character Recognition (OCR) data:** OCR software was used to identify what participants were looking at on their screens (for c. 5 minutes per day), to measure exposure to content produced by or about a news outlet, served by Facebook in participants’ newsfeeds. OCR reads every piece of text that is shown on screen within a video taken via screen record by a participant. It also captures how long the text appeared on screen.
- Participants’ own **Facebook activity data** (downloaded by participants after the treatment and shared with the research team) was also analysed to give an indication of engagement with news (likes, comments, subscriptions and posts).

# Approach to analysis

## Treatment



### Direct effect of treatment for participants

- We looked at what occurred as a direct result of the treatment, specifically:
- What news appeared in the newsfeeds for cohorts 1 (follow PSBs) and 2 (follow counter-attitudinal sources);
- How participants responded to the request to review their news diet on Facebook (cohort 3);
- How participants responded to the request to install and use the Trust Score browser extension (cohort 4).



### Impact on engagement with news

- Next, we observed how participants engaged with news, for example by:
- interacting with news;
- spending more/less time consuming a news article;
- seeking out certain news;
- recognising bias in the news they read;
- considering their opinions of the news they're seeing.



### Impact on knowledge, trust and polarisation

- Finally, we explored whether participants appeared to experience any changes in:
- The extent to which they feel informed about topical news and current affairs;
- Trust in news, news organisation and public institutions (such as Government); and
- Their feelings towards those who hold opposing views to themselves (i.e. affective polarisation).

# Glossary of key terms and sources

Term	Definition
Affective polarisation	Individuals' feelings towards members of their own political party or group become more positive, and/or their feelings towards members of the opposing party or group become more negative.
Cohort	All participants were split into one of 4 groups (cohorts), each of which were given a different treatment task. There were 11 participants per cohort.
Duration	The <b>amount of time</b> (in seconds) a participant has spent looking at content produced by or about a news outlet. This is a proxy measure for how engaged or interested a participant was in that piece of content.
Exposure	The <b>number of times</b> a participant was shown content produced by or about a news outlet. This includes posts directly from news outlets shared on newsfeeds, posts shared by friends and family, news articles and accounts viewed by participants. Exposure was observed through experience diaries, OCR analysis and Facebook passive data.
Facebook passive data	Participants were asked to request, download and share their activity data on Facebook. This data was shared voluntarily by our participants. It included data on which pages they had viewed/visited, new friends/accounts followed, posts made or content they had liked/commented on during fieldwork.
Global news	News outlets that are based abroad and primarily focus on news outside the UK.
Local news	News sources that have a regional or local distribution.
Mainstream news	Channels that have the widest readership across the UK as a whole.
Media Plurality	Media plurality is a core component of a well-functioning democratic society. Plurality is not a goal in itself, but instead makes an essential contribution to ensuring: (a) citizens are well-informed, able to access and consume a wide range of viewpoints across TV, radio, online and print media from a variety of media organisations; and (b) no single media owner, or voice, is able to exercise too great an influence over the political process.
News aggregator	Websites or apps that bring together news from different news providers.

# Glossary of key terms and sources

Term	Definition
NewsGuard	Browser extension (and app) that participants downloaded which gave them reliability ratings for news and information sources to help them make decisions about which news sources to trust.
Optical Character Recognition (OCR)	Technology used in the research to identify what participants were looking at on their screens. This was used to measure exposure to content produced by or about a news outlet, served by Facebook in participant newsfeeds. OCR reads every piece of text that is shown on screen within a video taken via screen record by a participant. It also captures how long the text appeared on screen ('duration').
Pre-post interviews	In-depth qualitative interviews were held with the participants before and after the treatment.
Pre-post survey	Participants recorded their news consumption behaviours and attitudes in a short form and completed this task at the beginning and the end of the research. This was used to help monitor change over time.
Public Service Broadcaster (PSB)	The UK's Public Service Broadcasters are BBC, ITV, STV, UTV, Channel 4, S4C and Channel 5. The PSBs are required to comply with Ofcom's Broadcasting Code which includes rules that require broadcast news to be presented with due impartiality.
Sports news	News outlets that are purely dedicated to sport.

# Summary of each cohort

## Cohort 1 Follow PSBs

Participants generally **did engage with more PSB content** as a result of the treatment. This helped some to **recognise the bias** in their existing news sources, and some to feel **better informed** about a range of topics. However, some found PSB news **not to their taste**, and for some it **reinforced negative perceptions**.

## Cohort 2 Follow Counter-Attitudinal News Sources

Participants **saw more counter-attitudinal news** as a result of the treatment, although this was often through **comments** sections. **Results were very mixed**, with some feeling more informed, but some finding the new sources they followed of little interest. Shifts in feelings towards those with other attitudes were minor.

## Cohort 3 News Diet Review

Despite no clear guidance on what changes to make, **most participants did make changes** to which news outlets they followed. This helped some feel **empowered** and to **reflect on the quality or bias of the news** they receive on Facebook. However, this did not lead to participants feeling more informed or less polarised.

## Cohort 4 Trust Score Browser Extension

Trust scores mostly **validated participants' existing range of trusted sources**. Apart from a few isolated cases, participants **did not change which news sources they followed** as a result of trust scores, or the frequency they used them. Therefore there was **little to no impact** on outcomes such as reducing polarisation.

**NB:** this analysis is purely exploratory. Any “effects” that we describe were found at the participant-level. A larger-scale quantitative study would be required to investigate these issues more fully.

# Cohort 1 – Follow Public Service Broadcasters



Cohort made up of those who **reported seeing either ‘Not very much’ or ‘No content at all’ from PSBs** on their social media newsfeeds.



Cohort were asked to **follow 2-3 PSB accounts** on Facebook. This included BBC News, ITV News, Channel 4 News and Channel 5 News, as well as regional alternatives such as BBC Scotland or STV.

# Overview of Key Outcomes

## Direct effect of treatment for participants: exposure to news

- Overall, the treatment's **impact on exposure to PSB content on Facebook was limited**.
- Generally, exposure **did not increase as much as anticipated**, with similar levels of PSB content seen both before and after participants followed PSB accounts. It is possible this was partially led by large amounts of BBC references being observed the weeks prior to the research, due to the Huw Edwards story.

## Impact on engagement with news

- Despite little change in exposure to PSB content across the cohort overall, there was an **increase in engagement with PSB content**, most notably with BBC and ITV on Facebook.
- For some participants, the impartial style of PSB content helped them to **recognise bias in their other news sources**; and in rarer cases become more considerate of alternative points of view.
- Some others with pre-existing negative views of PSBs sought or identified examples of content that **reinforced their negative perceptions** of these sources.
- For a small number of participants, the neutral and **impartial style of PSBs did not align with their preferences**. These participants preferred news served via social media to be tailored to their own perspective, and therefore did not engage with PSBs.

## Impact on knowledge, trust and polarisation

- Some participants said they felt **'more informed'** post-treatment, which is likely to be largely driven by a reported increase in the breadth of news topics seen by some participants in their newsfeeds.
- However, the treatment did not generate an increase in exposure to news on current affairs and politics, and thus participants were **no more likely to feel informed about current affairs issues**.
- **Trust in news** on Facebook and media institutions was **mixed**. Engagement with PSBs made some participants feel their news feed was **more impartial and unbiased**, whilst others became **further entrenched in their distrust** of PSB sources.
- The pre-post survey identified higher affective polarisation post treatment among a small number of participants. However, there was **little qualitative evidence supporting shifts in views towards people with opposing perspectives**.

## Views of PSB news sources pre-treatment were mixed

Some participants were sceptical towards PSB sources. This seemed driven in part by their **perceptions of PSB news coverage during COVID** and other news stories that circulated at the time of fieldwork, such as the Huw Edwards story in July 2023.

Some participants perceived PSB sources to **be relatively neutral and unbiased**, and valued these attributes. They expected PSB news to be relatively more trustworthy compared to other sources.

The impartial style of news coverage presented by PSBs did not suit all participant's news tastes. Some also preferred news sources which aligned more closely with their own beliefs and interests.

*Note: Even though very few participants in this cohort were subscribed to PSB accounts before the treatment, they were occasionally seeing some BBC and other PSB news sources on Facebook.*

*I think they are controlled/regulated but to me that doesn't mean they're 100% true. For instance, there was a lot of things they got wrong on COVID.*

**Male, 34-55**

*Ironic that the BBC wish to share controversy about ITV after the "behind the scenes" controversy they themselves are currently facing public attention for Huw Edwards etc.*

**Male, 34-55**

*I think they're OK, I think they're somewhat trustworthy but not 100%. I would probably go to Google to double check what they say.*

**Female, 55+**

# Some participants self-reported an increased exposure to PSB content during the course of the trial

Most participants in Cohort 1 reported **little immediate increase in exposure to PSB sources** in their newsfeeds. However, after the first week some participants claimed seeing a significant increase in prevalence of these sources on their newsfeed.

This contradicted the expectations of many participants, who anticipated being flooded with content from PSB sources instantly.

*I thought I'd be inundated with news from the new pages straight away, but there wasn't really much change at all at the start.*

**Male, 34-55**

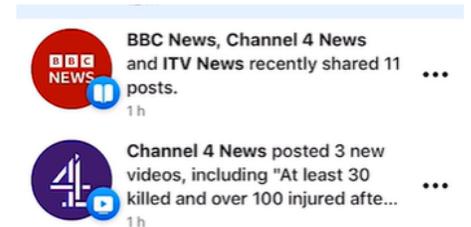
In particular, some participants perceived an increase in **direct triggers** to engage with news from PSBs, notably more **suggested pages** (e.g BBC Sport, Channel 4 Lifestyle etc.), and **notifications**.

*After following the additional news outlets on here and throughout the week, I have been seeing more postings on my news feed - BBC News and then Channel 4 and Channel 5 News and also ITV News and SO.*

**Female, 34-55**

*I wasn't really receiving as many notifications, but they've definitely ramped up a bit, especially over the weekend.*

**Male, 34-55**



Q Caption & Comments Tags Notes

14 Aug 2023 · 21:55

Notification received on Facebook for this news video from Channel 4

I have a few friends that work in the NHS so this caught my eye

Like the video posting however have also gone onto website to read further

Have shared this video on with friends

# However, the actual amount of PSB news content that appeared on Facebook news feeds over the trial period remained broadly consistent with pre-treatment levels

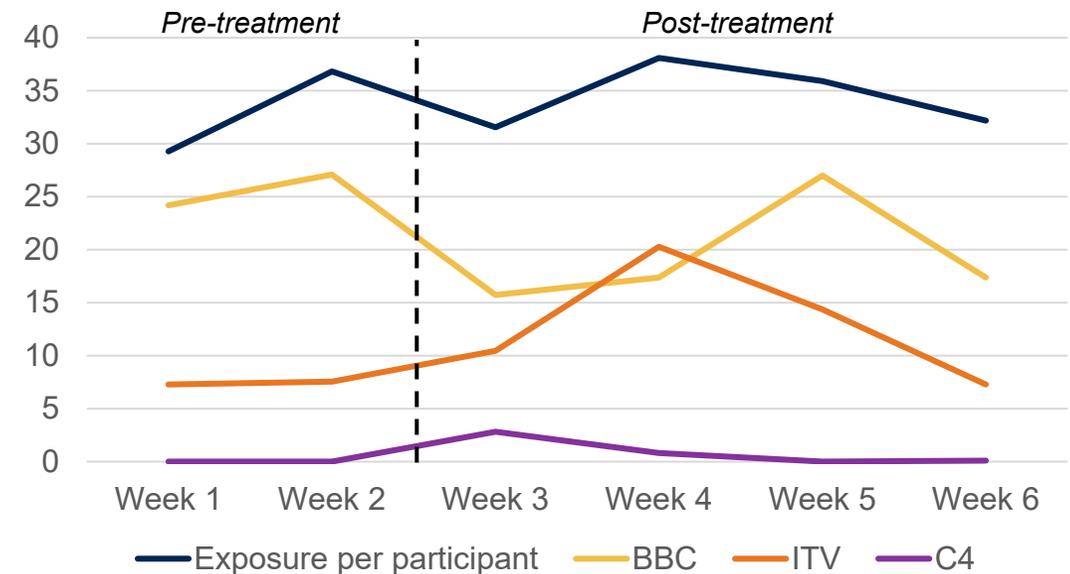
Regardless of perceptions of increased exposure to news from PSB sources, there appeared to be a limited impact on the actual amount of PSB content served in newsfeeds (as measured by the OCR software).

It is important to note that the OCR recorded each time the name of the UK PSBs appeared on their newsfeeds, including content about PSBs from non-PSB sources (e.g. a BuzzFeed article that mentions 'BBC' in the headline would be count as exposure to BBC content).

Bearing this caveat in mind, we note the following observations from the OCR data:

- Despite a majority of this cohort not reporting seeing PSBs on their newsfeeds before the research, **pre-treatment exposure to PSB sources appeared relatively high**. This could, in part, be attributed to a lot of news circulating (by a range of sources) about the BBC newsreader Huw Edwards; as well as a poor level of recall among participants of PSB news on social media.\*
- **There appears to be a slight increase in exposure to content by or about PSB news outlets** (driven by ITV and Channel 4 exposures) but given the small sample size and caveats associated with OCR data, **we cannot conclude whether any real increase was observed**.

OCR: Exposure (Count) of PSB Outlets



# Analysis of Facebook data suggested that engagement with PSB outlets increased post-treatment

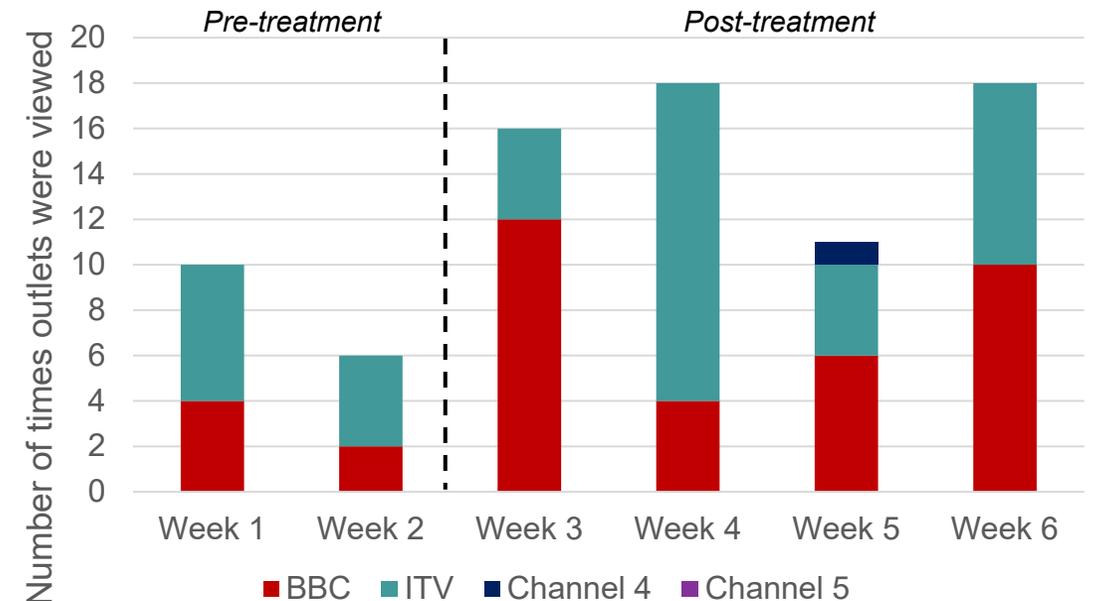
The Facebook passive data showed an increase in the number of posts by or about PSB sources that participants clicked on post-treatment.

Overall, the data shows a substantial increase in engagement with PSB content across weeks 3-6 compared to weeks 1-2:

- Weekly average engagement for **BBC rose from 3 to 8 posts**, and a smaller increase for ITV of **5 to 7.5 posts**.
- The spike in ITV during week 4 is likely attributed to a number of crime stories reported by ITV.
- There was very little engagement with Channel 4 which recorded zero engagement for the majority of the study, along with Channel 5.

However, it's possible that engagement increased in part due to a **research effect** whereby participants took more notice of PSB content given their involvement with this research.

## Facebook Data: Recently viewed PSB channels



## Engagement with PSB news content made some consider the potential bias of their existing news sources

Some participants noticed the contrast in how UK PSBs would present the same news story in a manner that was **less emotionally charged** and with a **more neutral and impartial tone** than the news sources they previously preferred and relied on for news on Facebook. This prompted them to **question the influence and objectivity of their current news sources**.

In some cases, participants showed signs of becoming aware of their own potential biases and starting to **consider alternative points of view**.

*I started thinking about how much influence this might be having over my personal views at the moment.*

**Female, 18-34**

*I found the [BBC] article to be really unbiased but had it had a tone that didn't agree with my own stance on immigration, I'd have googled to read other perspectives on the story. I very rarely react on FB posts but I found this story really sad so I "sad reacted".*

**Female, 18-34**

*Comparing the way some pages showed news stories compared to sources like the BBC and ITV, did make me think a bit about how I currently get my news.*

**Male, 18-34**

# The style of news coverage presented by PSBs did not suit all participants' news preferences

While some participants preferred a **more neutral and fact-based approach** to news, others tend to look for news **that aligns with their own beliefs**, interests, or preferences.

Therefore, there were instances where the style of PSB news sources was not **relevant** and **engaging** enough for certain participants. Two participants mentioned they had/ would unfollow the new PSB sources they had recently followed at the end of the research.

Some of these participants wanted to see news that was more relevant for minority groups, more localised news, or even more entertaining and opinionated news.

*Overall, the type of news of I see on Facebook would be more local interest stories, not the real big national news events... obviously the newspapers I follow like the Independent and The Guardian, they would post on post bigger stories on to Facebook. But the likes of BBC News and ITV didn't.*

**Male, 35-54**

*I feel like the major channels have more of a general lens and not always a point of view that is that close to mine. For example, the way they report on certain issues.*

**Female, 35-54**

Engagement  
with news:  
Reinforce  
negative  
views

## For some, exposure reinforced existing negative perceptions of media bias among PSBs

Participants who were initially more sceptical about PSBs, scrutinised these sources more intently during the research. These participants reported that when they came across PSB content, it **confirmed their existing distrust of PSBs**.

Some found flaws in certain stories published by PSB outlets and viewed PSB coverage as biased and strategic. This suggests that for some participants, the treatment appeared to further entrench their distrust of PSBs.

Scepticism of PSBs can also lead to **more deliberate engagement**. For instance, one participant looked for flaws in certain stories published by PSB outlets, such as a story from Channel 4 regarding the diversion of an aircraft.

*Depending on what news it is depends on whether I believe them. For example, being a black female, as with Notting Hill Carnival they always exaggerate the violence and takes it out of context, so this decreases the level of trust in certain news stories from PSB's.*

**Female, 34-55**

*The plane diversion story is wrong. The aircraft was diverted to Liverpool not Manchester as the news article said. I watched the flying flight radar. Just shows the press can get it wrong.*

**Male, 55+**

## However, increased engagement did not always translate into feeling more informed on current affairs

Around half of participants noted a **positive shift in the diversity of topics they were exposed to**, whilst the rest reported no change.

However, participants reported **feeling no more informed on current affairs topics** such as the UK economy, health, immigration, climate change and politics, with a few participants reporting feeling less informed, and the rest noting no change. Participants did mention seeing increased exposure to sports, animal and celebrity news.

One participant revealed they were consuming more news than before the study but did not necessarily feel more informed on current affairs topics. This participant said they **tended to only read the headlines**, making them aware of narratives in the news, but not of the details behind the stories.

It's possible that participants' perceptions of feeling 'more informed' were **driven by an increase in diversity of content** on their newsfeed rather than any engagement with more news on current affairs and politics.

*I've been seeing a lot more stories on different topics. Mainly things around sports, some showbiz news, and strangely a lot of animal news. A little bit more on politics but not a massive change.*

**Female, 35-54**

*I now know what other news sources are out there which has been useful. But I wouldn't say it's changed how much news I engage with on things like politics.*

**Male, 35-54**

*I was seeing more news, which I was happy with so my experience of getting news on Facebook has improved. That being said, I don't see much more on important UK issues.*

**Female, 35-54**

## Some participants reported an improvement in the value of their newsfeeds

Increased engagement with PSB content led to a perceived increase in the breadth of new topics on some participants' newsfeeds.

Such participants reported an **increase in how much news they felt they engaged** with on Facebook and that they felt Facebook had become a **more useful source for breaking news**, as they reported seeing some news stories earlier, making it **more time efficient**.

*I definitely now have a way better experience with getting my news on Facebook - I now feel a lot more in the know of what's happening with the news. I see a lot more different types of news especially more global, UK and local news, as well as a wider variety generally.*

**Female, 18-34**

*I love that I now see a lot more news content. I find myself going on Facebook a lot more and wanting to see what's going on. It's definitely now my number one place to go.*

**Female, 18-34**

*I can go to so many different places and be informed if I want to, and definitely feel more informed about what other news outlets are out there.*

**Male, 35-54**

## Some participants did see subsequent improvement in perceptions of quality and trust, but not all

In interviews, some participants perceived that PSBs had higher journalistic standards, making their news of **higher quality and less biased**.

**In the pre-post survey, about a third of participants** reported an increase in perception of quality in the news they see on Facebook. However, there was a limited impact on measures relating to trust in news and media organisations post-treatment.

PSBs were identified by some participants as being **trustworthy** in comparison to tabloids. Some also thought that tabloids sensationalise stories to receive more attention.

*The way they [PSBs] report on news stories is usually more reliable. I don't feel like they have an agenda and I imagine they have quite high fact-checking procedures.*

**Female, 35-54**

*I found them [PSBs] trustworthy, more than the tabloids. Anything that requires money, e.g. to generate money to survive, everything they say comes with a pinch of salt online. It's all as click bait.*

**Male, 35-54**

*Yeah I wouldn't say I think they [PSBs] are massively trustworthy. Even during the research, I saw them report on stories in a way which just didn't sit right with me.*

**Male, 34-55**

# Most participants' feelings towards those with alternative views remained the same

Most participants reported **no, or little change in how they felt about people who hold alternative opinions** to their own. However, the pre-post survey suggest that, after treatment, **some participants were further entrenched in their views**, and had more hostility towards alternative views to their own. Specifically, people's feelings towards those who vote for the opposition was 'colder' among a small minority of participants within the cohort,\* with one participant finding it harder to be friends with those supporting the opposition.

The **fluctuating attitudes towards people online may reflect the key issues in the news**. For example, one participant noted that news is not continuous and may trigger different responses based on what is currently a hot topic.

*One interesting thing about the news is that it is never continuous so it will be migration one week and economy the next... I guess that can influence how I feel towards people who think different to me depending on what's being talked about at the time.*

**Male, 34-55**

# Case Study: PSB content failed to engage

Female, 18-34

## Baseline

Already followed BBC News, but otherwise preferred getting her news from trusted influencers who would present news in a manner that aligned with her experience as an ethnic minority woman.

News significant form of social currency, relies on group chats to receive and share news of interest.

*I share a lot of news, and have a few group chats where we talk about what we've seen and what we think about what's going on. (baseline interviews)*



## Exposure

Did recall some increase in exposure to PSB outlets during the treatment phase, particularly from BBC.

She reported that some stories didn't have a lens that they agreed with. For example, she felt the coverage of Notting Hill Carnival over exaggerated the violence and takes it out of context. In contrast, she **prefers receiving news which has a similar lens to her own.**

*I wouldn't say I trust them much at all. Some of the ways they have presented stories, particularly towards black people has been very biased. (post-treatment interview)*

Average weekly duration of PSBs pre-post treatment:

**4.4 to 5.7 seconds**

## Impact

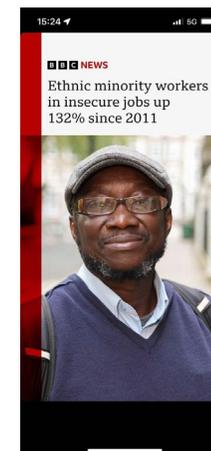
Felt **more informed** from seeing more news on feed and thus aware of main headlines. However, **less satisfied** with the **diversity of news**, seeking out influencers for news with a perspective closer to hers. BBC reporting on carnival made her **more unappreciative of alternative views** and perspectives in regard to certain issues.

Reported the treatment as **reducing her trust in the news**, as she was seeing more PSB sources she perceived to be untrustworthy.

*I would trust the podcasts more that I follow, as the broadcasters have an end game to sell news and exaggerate certain things, gas light certain communities, a lot like politicians. (post-treatment interview)*



28 Jul 2023 · 9:41 (10:41)  
BBC News appeared on my FB stories this morning



# Case Study: More diverse newsfeed, no more informed

Female, 18-34

## Baseline

Little prevalence of PSB sources on Facebook, associated them **more with offline sources** (namely TV & Radio) and therefore didn't think they were worth following on social media.

Saw some, but limited news on current affairs and politics on Facebook. Relied on offline sources more for this, mainly BBC Website.

*I didn't really take them [PSBs] seriously on Facebook, I would associate them more with TV and not that suited for social media. (baseline interview)*

## Exposure

Treatment increased her exposure to more news topics and diversity of content via PSBs, and reported an **increase in celebrity news**, (which she wasn't too interested in), **one off crime stories** and some **breaking political stories**, and 'animal content'.

Saw an **increase** in average weekly duration of **6.4 seconds** of PSB outlets pre-treatment to **26.2 seconds** post treatment.

*I've noticed myself going to the notifications pages to see what new news content is out there and usually I'll click through from there. (online upload)*

## Impact

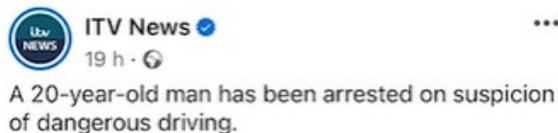
**Pre-post survey saw increase in the diversity of news topics** seen on Facebook, but **no change** in how **informed she felt about major issues**, particularly current affairs and politics.

Noted **little change** in terms of **diversity of opinions** on her newsfeed, as well as **little change in feelings towards the opposition**. She cited this was because news articles did not feel particularly biased and were not covering too many political issues, and therefore did not expose her to alternative perspectives much.

*These ones, these stories aren't necessarily the big top breaking news stories, but it's quite nice to see them, a bit of a variation. (online upload)*

18 Jul 2023 · 20:08 (21:08)

Have listened to Sky News, read BBC and the Metro via social media today. Will have Sky News on most days to keep up to date with breaking news BBC News website - will also visit most days usually whilst commuting to work, on lunch or in the evening. Use this outlet to keep up to date on global and UK News  
Links to news stories will pop up on my social media, depending on what they are I will either read the headlines or click into the full story.



# Cohort 2 - Follow counter-attitudinal news sources



Cohort made up of a mix of those who self-identify as **right-wing** and those who self-identify as **left-wing**



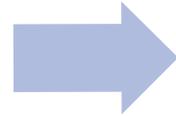
Cohort were asked to **follow 2-3 counter-attitudinal news sources\***

*\* This was based on data from Ofcom's News Consumption Survey (NCS). On the NCS, respondents list news sources that they read, and in a separate question self-identify their political stance (e.g. left or right wing). These two elements were combined to create a list of news sources which are more likely than average to be read by people who self-identify as either left or right wing. The list of sources with an audience more left-leaning than average included: The Daily Mirror, The Guardian/Observer, The Independent, The i, The Huffington Post/Huffpost. The list of sources with an audience more right-leaning than average included: Daily Mail, Daily Express, Daily Telegraph, GB News. Note that we could not include news sources that have paywalls.*

# Overview of Key Outcomes

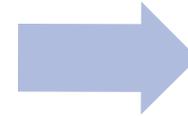
## Direct effect of treatment for participants: exposure to news

- Participants had low levels of pre-treatment exposure to counter attitudinal news sources. Exposure to these counter-attitudinal sources **substantially increased post-treatment**.
- Some participants reported feeling more exposed to alternative views, primarily through **comments sections**.



## Impact on engagement with news

- Participants generally preferred seeing news content that they perceived to be more **impartial**.
- Others reported greater exposure to **less informative news outlets**, which tended to cover more stories on topics such as celebrity and crime news. Some participants deemed these types of topics to be uninteresting.



## Impact on knowledge, trust and polarisation

- The impact of the treatment on participants' level of trust in news was **mixed**, with some participants finding **more impartial sources** they felt they could trust, and others feeling more exposed to **uninformative news stories** which they deemed to be **unreliable**.
- The impact of greater exposure to counter-attitudinal views on participants' **feelings towards those with different perspectives** appeared to be small and directionally **mixed** across the cohort.
- The treatment appeared to have **little impact on how informed participants felt** generally, or about major news topics.

## Participants initially claimed they rarely came across counter-attitudinal views

During baseline depth interviews, most participants reported that they had some (limited) exposure to alternative perspectives in news. **Most participants perceived their news as relatively objective and unopinionated.**

Participants generally struggled to recall instances of coming across alternative, and specifically counter-attitudinal, views on their Facebook newsfeeds, particularly from news stories themselves.

Instead, the **comments sections** were reported as the main source for seeing and engaging with a range of alternative views.

*Struggling to remember much [counter-attitudinal views] from news stories themselves...I do see a lot of different opinions in the comments on news articles, especially from certain news stories. Sometimes I agree with them, other times not so much but usually you get quite a mix.*

**Female, 55+, Right leaning**

## Reported exposure to alternative views increased

Some participants reported feeling **exposed to more counter attitudinal views**, following the treatment. Participants who favoured a diverse newsfeed tended to appreciate this exposure, as it helped them form their own opinions. Again, participants reported **comments sections** as the main place where they saw alternative views, **rather than the news articles** themselves.

However, for other participants, exposure to “new” alternative news sources reaffirmed their desire for a news diet that was tailored to them and therefore reported **lower trust and satisfaction** from getting their news from Facebook.

*To be honest I quite liked seeing people's opinions on the comments, it challenges your own perspective and helps you in the long run.*  
**Male, 18-35, Left leaning**

*I feel like I've been exposed to alternative points of view. This is good because it makes you more informed of what others think. That helps me form my own opinion, so I'd say I'm happy with seeing more on what others think.*  
**Female, 35-54, Right leaning**

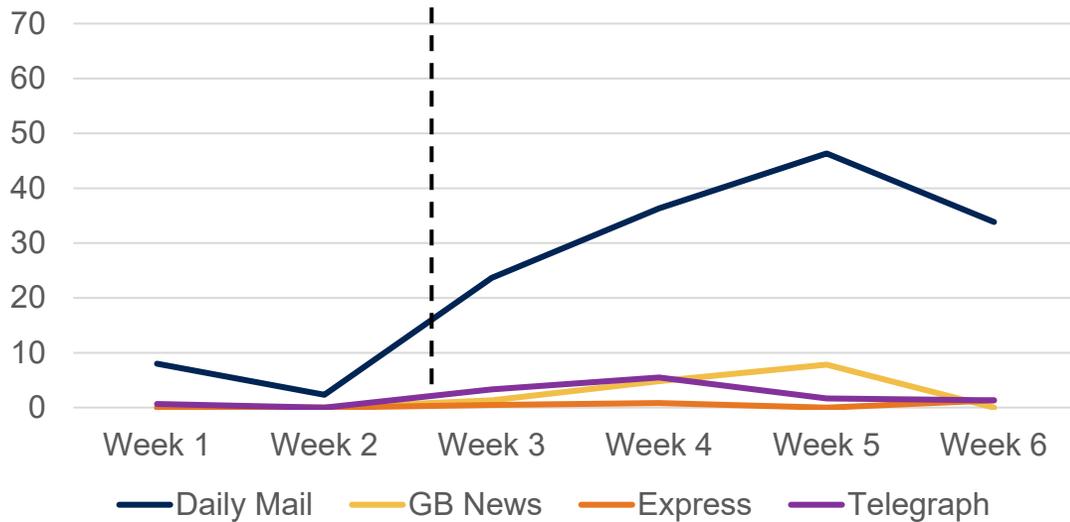
*Even though I vote conservative I don't just want their views on my timeline. I've found it really useful to know what different sides are saying about the main issues.*  
**Female, 55+, Right leaning**

*I'm seeing less news Christian news on my newsfeed since I started following more of these sources. Not something I'm massively happy about if I'm honest.*  
**Male, 35-54, Right leaning**

Direct effect of treatment for participants

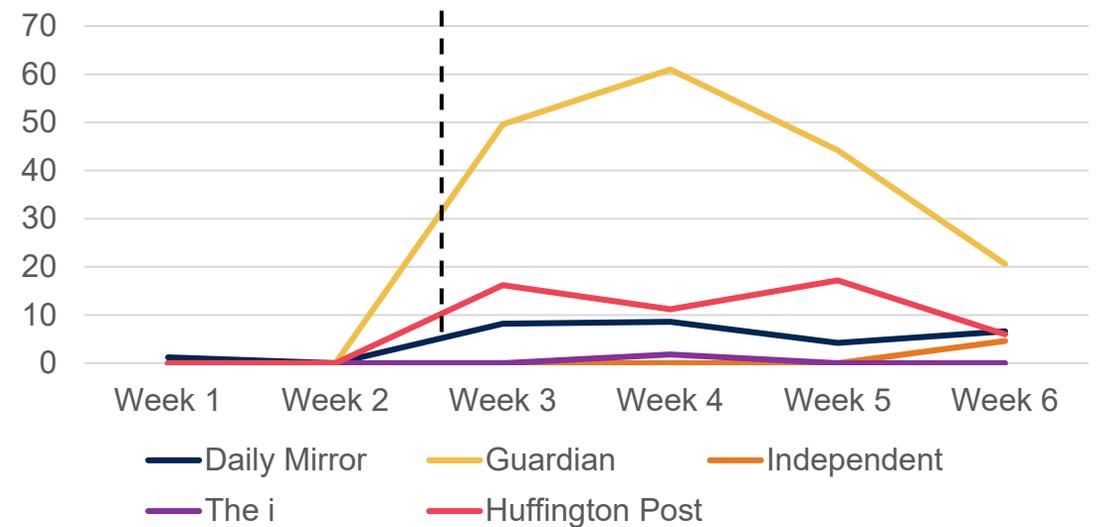
# Both left- and right-leaning participants experienced increased exposure to the new counter-attitudinal sources they followed, particularly The Guardian and Daily Mail

OCR: Average exposure (count) of right leaning outlets per participant



Please note this includes all 11 participants, not just those who self-identified as left-wing

OCR: Average exposure (count) of left leaning outlets per participant



Please note this includes all 11 participants, not just those who self-identified as right-wing

The passive OCR data indicated that, overall, participants **had low exposure to 'counter-attitudinal' sources** prior to the treatment. Exposure to counter-attitudinal sources (as captured by the amount of times that posts by, or about, the source appeared in newsfeeds during the OCR period of analysis\*), significantly increased relative to baseline. Of these, Daily Mail and The Guardian increased the most. This is due to these sources being the most frequently selected by participants to follow during the treatment, given that they were the most well-known.

## Participants generally preferred more impartial news sources

Some participants wanted to see more **objective news** on their newsfeeds and did not use Facebook to gauge the opinion of others or inform their own. These participants reported an aversion to reading comments or engaging in online discussions.

Any negative perceptions towards the news sources listed in the treatment task tended to be driven by the type of news they report on, rather than their political leaning. Many participants were happy to receive news from these 'new' sources, especially where the news outlet was perceived to be **less opinionated** and **more impartial**.

There were participants in both subgroups who found 'new' counter-attitudinal sources that became their number one source of news going forward. This appears to be driven by participants seeing topics of interest to them, presented in a factual manner.

Participants reported more negative experiences where they felt the sources were either **too opinion based** or **covered topics they were not interested in**, e.g. celebrity news.

*I'm not too interested in news pages which are more opinionated. I just want somewhere which gives me the facts and then I can make my own opinion from there.*

**Male, 55+, Right leaning**

*I much prefer the sources that just give me the facts of a story. I don't like it when they try and "bully" me into making a particular opinion.*

**Male, 18-34, Left leaning**

*Some of the new sources are really useful for me. I'm not too interested in pages which have a nasty tone. I just like it when I get the information in a clear way.*

**Male, 18-34, Left leaning**

*I've clicked on this guardian article about climate change. I'm interested in this area so I'd always click on something like this... Now the first thing I do when I'm on Facebook is go to the guardian page for news stories.*

**Male, 55+, Right leaning**

## Some participants reported seeing topics of less interest to them

Participants who chose to follow sources that tended to report on **celebrity or crime news** noted an increase in exposure to these topics which they were uninterested in. This caused some participants across both subgroups to **unfollow these news sources** during the treatment period.

Some participants **increased engagement with these topics** but found them of little educational value and over time found that they had misleading headlines and misinformation, resulting in **reduced trust** in the specific news sources themselves, as well as news on Facebook more broadly.

Exposure to more news sources led to a few participants feeling more informed from the news they saw on Facebook. However, most participants reported no shift in their level of knowledge on current affairs.

*I don't think much has changed in how informed I am in the important stories really, but I'll probably keep the new sources. No harm in having more sources available to you.*

**Female, 34-55, Right leaning**

*To be honest, one thing I was quite frustrated with was the amount of rubbish news I was seeing. Like I don't care at all about what's going on in Love Island or whatever, I was hoping to see more important news, but this hasn't been the case.*

**Male, 55+, Right leaning**

*At first, I guess that I did become interested in some stories like crime and murder stories that I wouldn't usually, but I can't say they were particularly informative or what I would call useful news.*

**Female, 18-34, Left leaning**

*I'll definitely be unfollowing the Huff Post, didn't have useful stories.*

**Male, 55+, Right leaning**

*The Daily Mail had a lot of rubbish...mainly gossip.*

**Male, 34-55, Left leaning**

*The Mirror was mainly celeb news which I'm not interested in.*

**Female, 55+, Right leaning**

# Exposure to counter-attitudinal news had mixed effects on participants' trust in news

The OCR data indicates that participants experienced increased exposure to news outlets that produce a high volume of human-interest stories and showbiz news, as a result of following these outlets in the treatment period.

Some participants reported that **seeing news they perceived to be 'lower quality' reduced their general trust in news** and the Facebook newsfeed, with some reporting that they started to take extra steps to verify the reliability of news they were seeing.

However, around half of participants reported **a positive shift in their trust of media institutions and organisations**. These participants tended to be those who felt they saw more impartial and balanced news as a result of the treatment. Participants commented that this was due to their 'new' sources providing them with the relevant information without feeling like the article was trying to influence their opinion.

*It made me realise that you have to be more careful about trusting headlines. I use comments more now as they tell you if the story is accurate and can give you more context than just the headline.*

**Female, 18-34, Left leaning**

*Generally, I like news that just gives me the information without trying to influence me. The Guardian was really useful for that I found... It's a news source that I trust a lot now.*

**Male, 55+, Right leaning**

**Outcome:**  
Affective  
polarisation

# There were mixed effects on participants' feelings towards those with alternative viewpoints

In the pre-post survey, around half of participants said they saw a positive shift in the variety and diversity of views they saw on their **newsfeeds** and in **comments sections**.

In follow up interviews, most participants reported minimal change in how they felt towards those with opposing views, with some stating that people are entitled to have and share their opinion online. The survey data found that **around half of those asked\* saw no change** in feelings towards people who vote for the opposition, and in how easy they would find it to be friends with this group.

However, some participants noted instances in which seeing counter-attitudinal views online **helped them reflect on their own views**, whilst **others showed signs of increased hostility**.

The pre-post survey data also suggests mixed effects on how participants felt towards those who hold different views on specific cultural topics. This suggests that exposure to counter-attitudinal views can vary in its impact, **entrenching some in their views**, whilst **warming others to alternative views**.

*As with any significant political topic, opinions on this issue are diverse, and Facebook serves as a platform for users to express their views and engage in constructive dialogue.*

**Female, 34-55+, Left leaning**

*I saw some stories around Brexit and its impacts on nurses, which made me rethink my initial stance.*

**Female, 35-54, Left leaning**

*Some of the comments on an immigration story... It just made me angry that people are thinking like that.*

**Male, 18-34, Left leaning**

# Case Study: Following new impartial news sources leads to increased trust in news

Male, 55+, Right leaning

## Baseline

Relied on a small number of accounts on his newsfeed, would go on Facebook just to get a quick read on news online but would look **for more in-depth stories from physical newspapers**. He reported Facebook was not currently optimal for news, as he does not see as much news on his feed as he would like.

As part of the treatment, he decided to follow: The Mirror, Guardian, and Huffington post, all sources he reported not seeing much of on his newsfeed pre-research.

*I don't really subscribe to a lot of news sources on Facebook, mainly just a few local sources. (baseline interview)*

## Exposure

Saw more of the 'new' news sources that he did not previously see on his timeline, both new ones followed as well as other suggested newspapers. He **perceived The Guardian to be trustworthy** and became more engaged with them due to a perceived **objective presentation of stories of interest**. He also liked seeing more breaking stories on newsfeeds. In contrast, he found that the **Huffington Post** news he was served was mainly **celebrity news**, resulting in him unfollowing it at the end of the research.

*I've seen and really come to my like breaking news stories and things like Daily Mirror, Guardian, etc. I've also seen Huff Post, a lot of non-relevant stories. (post-treatment upload)*

## Impact

Overall, he reported that his experience of getting news on Facebook improved, primarily due to having more news on his newsfeed, and being able to see news from The Guardian, which he perceives to be clear, objective, and in-depth. He stated that his **trust in news has increased** both generally, and on Facebook. He reported limited increase in **exposure to alternative views** with little impact on **affective polarisation**.

*I look at my newsfeed a lot more frequently and I would say my experience of getting news is for the better. I now read the stories more fully now and actually even subscribed to some more news channels. (post-treatment upload)*



*"What's going on in Russia really interests me, so viewing posts such as this is something I would normally do"*

# Case Study: Increase in 'low quality' news

Female, 18-34, Left leaning

## Baseline

Interested in local news but didn't want too many other news stories on their newsfeed **as they finds these can feel depressing**. Hesitant to follow 'new' sources to avoid being "bombarded with sad news stories", but also aware that diversifying newsfeed was important and therefore open to following 'new' sources. Little exposure to news sources in baseline. As part of the treatment, she decided to follow: The Telegraph, Daily Mail, Daily Express.

*It's important to have some awareness of what's going on, especially in the UK and local to me, but the news can be so depressing so I tend to try and limit how much I see on my newsfeed.*  
(baseline interview)

## Exposure

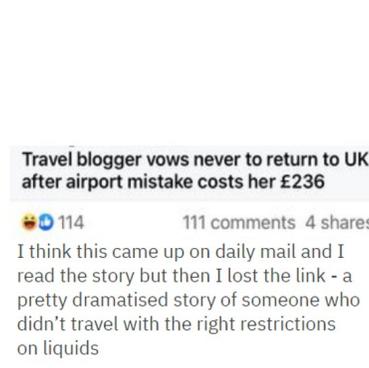
As a result of following these accounts, she found a large increase in the overall prevalence of news on her newsfeed, with a large portion of this being news on "gruesome" crime related stories with cliff hanger headlines that drew her in. Repeated exposure with these stories led to increased interest and engagement with them initially. However, after **repeated interaction** with these sources she felt that the **headlines of the articles were often misleading**.

*I definitely found myself reading more from these sources initially, the cliff hanger headlines would get me interested and I found myself reading a lot more 'shocking' and 'gruesome' stories as I was seeing a lot more of these types of stories.*  
(post-treatment interview)

## Impact

This experience resulted in disillusionment with the news sources and made her question why she was interacting with these stories in the first place. She mentioned that the treatment slightly **increased the diversity of news topics** she saw before, but this had "little educational value", and **reduced her overall trust in news online**. She reported little exposure to alternative perspectives, and little impact on **affective polarisation**.

*Overall, I'd say that I see more news on my newsfeed, but I'd have to say for the most part I've not got much more educational value from following the pages. I think in hindsight I would've liked to see more news on current affairs and politics.*  
(post-treatment interview)



# Cohort 3 – News diet review



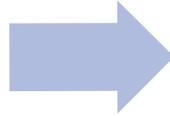
Cohort made up of a mix of those who consume news from **alternative/non-mainstream** media organisations and those consuming **mainstream** news sources.



Cohort were asked to **review the list of news pages they followed on Facebook** and make any changes they felt required to better align it with their ideal news diet.

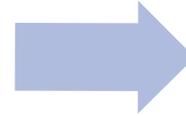
# Overview of Key Outcomes

## Direct effect of treatment for participants: exposure to news



- The news diet review task led to an adjustment to news sources followed for most participants.
- Only a few chose not to make changes and kept their existing news choices
- Passive data shows participants were exposed to smaller numbers of sources over the course of the trial which evidences a streamlining of sources.
- Majority of participants reported reducing the number of PSB sources they subscribed to
- Many participants stated a preference for reducing the amount of “celebrity” or “nonsense” news on their newsfeed.
- Participants revealed a **desire to continue reviewing their news feeds** going forward to ensure it remained optimal for them.
- Note: Participants **had difficulty** in accessing the news pages they follow, which suggests this is not typical online behaviour.

## Impact on engagement with news



- Overall, the review task led to a **feeling of greater empowerment/control**.
- The treatment encouraged participants to **critically reflect** on the quality of news sources they followed. As a result, some increased their scrutiny of news sources, becoming more conscious of their potential bias and reliability.
- A few were already satisfied with their newsfeed, felt little need to follow any more sources or unfollow existing ones, given they were happy with the range of news.

## Impact on knowledge, trust and polarisation

- There is no evidence that participants felt '**more informed**' post-treatment but tailoring of newsfeeds ensured news served more closely matched news interests.
- The treatment had a limited impact on overall **trust** in news on Facebook, with only a few participants reporting an increase in trust.
- The news diet review task had little impact on **polarisation** i.e. how participant felt towards people with different attitudes remained broadly the same.

# The news review task led to an adjustment to news diets for most participants

The review task revealed that there was generally low awareness/recall of which news accounts participants were actively following.

Most participants were **positively engaged** with the task and reviewed/made changes to the news sources they followed. A few chose not to make changes and **kept their existing news choices**.

One participant was not following any news sources, and instead chose to **allow the algorithm to decide** what they see in their newsfeed.

One participant commented that they felt changing their settings would help Facebook commoditise their account, as opposed to benefit themselves.

It is worth noting there were some complications in conducting the review process. There was limited **awareness among some** in how to edit newsfeed preferences which suggests this is not typical online behaviour.

*Makes you more self-aware. Not always conscious you're looking at particular things.*

**Female, 55+**

*Must admit I liked reviewing the pages I currently follow and up to now I didn't know how easy it was to do this once instructed or indeed you could go do that at all, I now plan to do this on a regular basis and see if it tailors my news appetite a bit better.*

**Male, 55+**

*I don't want to spend too much of my time trying to be specific about what choosing what news I want. I'd rather just see what comes through to me. I don't trust any news feeds enough to follow them which is another reason I just see what comes up each day.*

**Female, 35 – 54**

*Most people think that giving information on what news you would like to see would just benefit Facebook so they could make more money from you.*

**Male, 18-34**

# Pre-post tasks indicate the majority of participants made changes to the number of news sources they followed

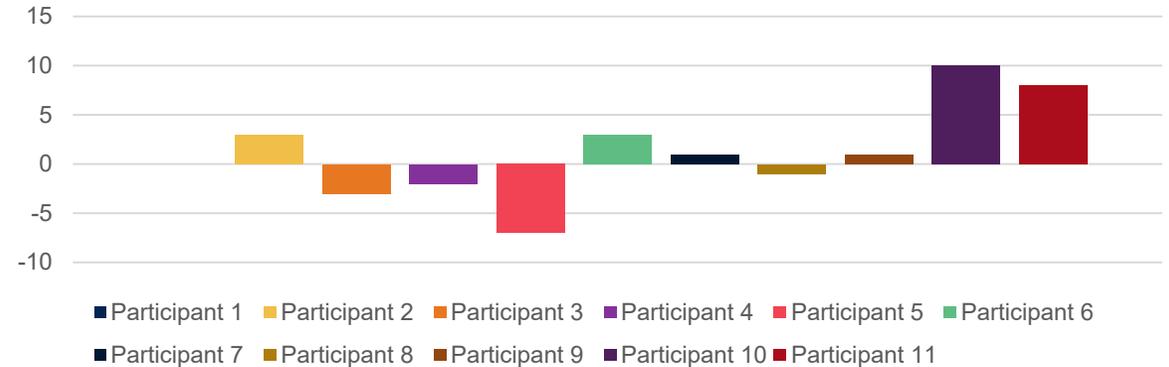
The impact on sources followed, as recalled by participants in the pre and post treatment tasks, indicates that changes made by participants in response to the review task varied with regard to adding and reducing sources.

The news diet review resulted in six participants in the cohort following **more** news sources on Facebook, four of which added 3 or more sources.

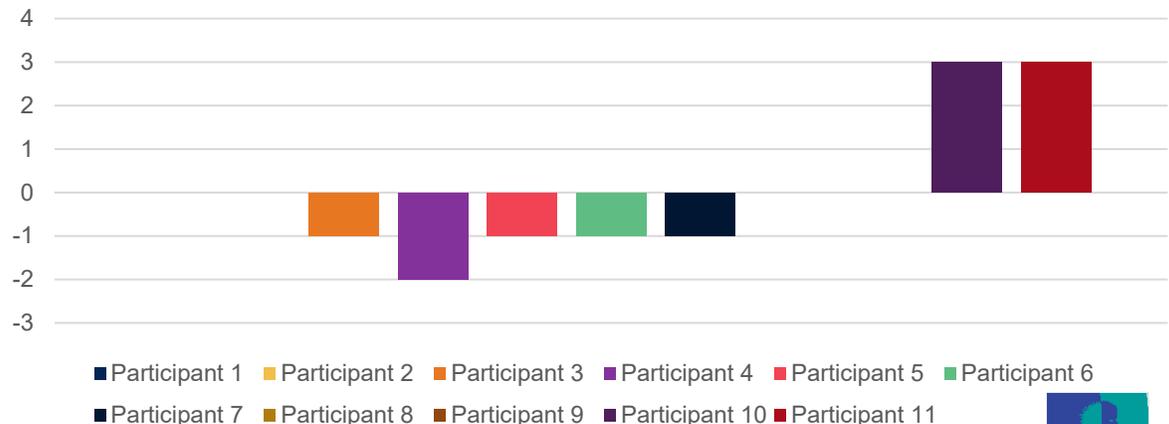
Four participants followed **fewer** sources following the review, two of which removed 3 or more sources.

When considering PSB news sources specifically, four participants made no change, while five removed at least one PSB. Two participants each added 3 PSBs.

Impact on overall number of news sources followed: Net difference in number of sources followed on Facebook – pre vs. post treatment



Impact on number of PSBs followed: Net difference (PSB's at impact - PSB's at baseline)



Direct effect of treatment for participants

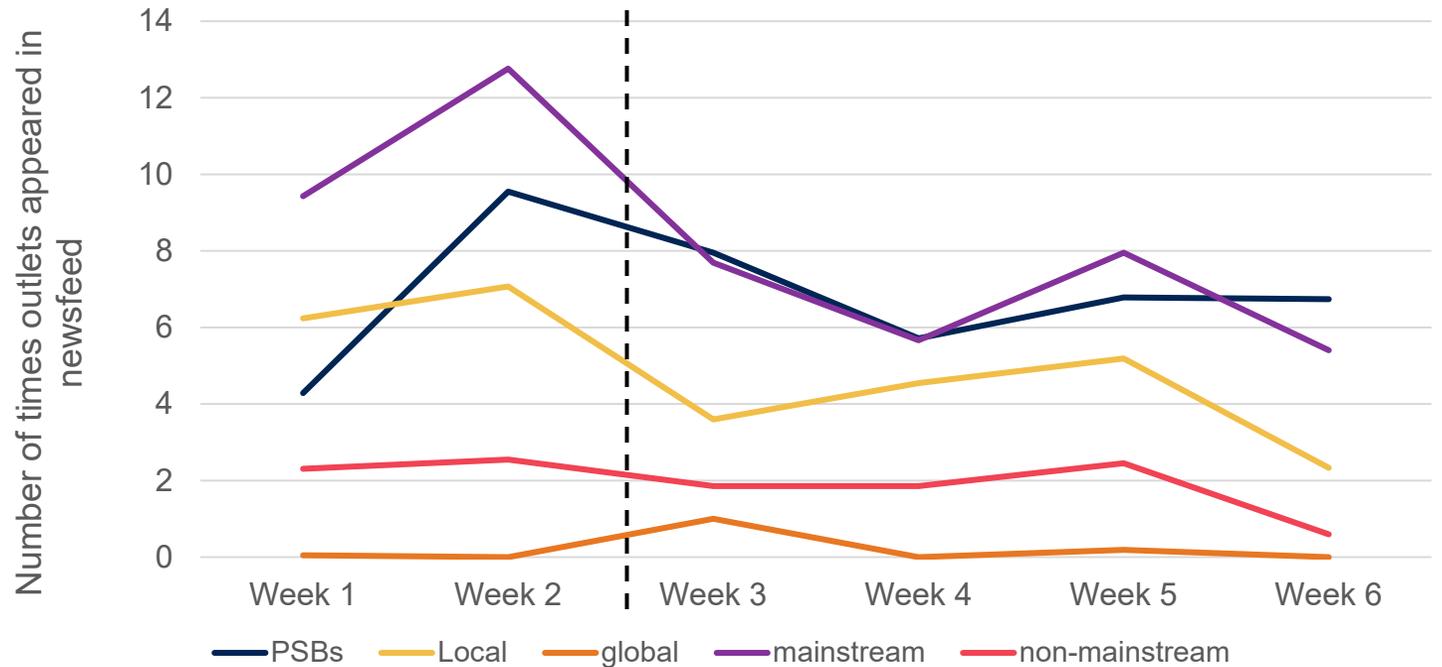
# OCR data shows the number of news sources that appeared on participants newsfeeds decreased over time

The OCR data shows participants' exposure to all types of news sources decreased after the news review treatment.

The weekly average exposure per participant across all types of news **fell from 27.1 news sources pre-treatment, to 19.4 news sources post treatment.**

This fall suggests that respondents were exposed to a **smaller, more tailored selection** of news sources post-treatment – likely a direct effect of the news review.

OCR: Weekly average exposure to types of news sources per participant



# The review task resulted in some participants feeling they had greater control over social media newsfeeds

Reviewing the news pages and accounts followed made many participants feel **empowered** by enabling active **control** over some of the content they receive on their newsfeed.

Some participants chose to **follow** specific news sources that they deemed to be high quality and were related to their needs and interests. For some respondents, this involved wanting to see **more positive** news in their diet.

Some participants also chose to **unfollow** news sources / pages that they felt produced **low-quality news**, or news sources which tended to cover topics they had **low interest** in. Many felt they could use the exercise as an opportunity to reduce the amount of “tabloid” news or “fake news” coming through their newsfeed.

However, a few that were **already satisfied** with their newsfeed, **felt little need** to follow any more sources or unfollow existing ones, given they were happy with the range of news.

*I think I'll want to go back and review my news diet and see if there are ways I can filter out the tabloid and celebrity news and put more of the world news and politics into the newsfeed and things.*

*Female, 18-34*

*So I have noticed a few things since I did the cleanse. I have more of the things I wanted to listen to or follow. I'm actually quite pleased that I did that little cleanse/purge. My news feeds have improved*

*There is a lot more local stuff.*

*Female, 35-54*

*Did unsubscribe from stupid platforms that are kind of like news, but very ridiculous e.g. E-News. Things not interested in at all, so have started to hide things or remove them from newsfeed because they are nonsense and really not a story.*

*Female, 55+*

# Greater critical engagement resulted in more awareness of potential biases in current news sources

Many participants revealed that, following reviewing their news diets, they became **more critical** of the news sources they saw / were following.

Higher critical engagement of their newsfeeds also meant some were more likely to **review the origin** of a news source and assess their **trustworthiness and bias**. One participant referenced looking for verified badges.

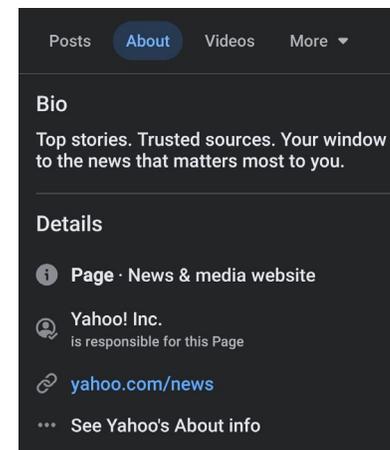
This appeared to help some participants become **more trusting** of news institutions as they were able to identify trustworthy sources and curate a newsfeed more geared around them.

*I definitely think I will be more active in terms of if I start to see those headlines that are misleading, and if that keeps happening I will be quicker to remove them.*

**Male, 18-34**

*I do look for verified badges for reputable and reliable news organizations. Verified accounts have a blue checkmark next to their name, indicating that they have been authenticated which gives me clarification and reassurance that what I am reading listening to is valid. A few examples are BBC News, The New York Times, The Guardian which I already follow and subscribe to.*

**Female, 18-34**



*I have clicked on the "about me", as I tend to find sources interesting and credible if they are trusted and reliable.*

**Female, 18-34**

**Outcome:**  
Affective  
polarisation

## Most participants' feelings towards those with alternative views remained the same

After the treatment, most participants were still generally content to see comments and news stories with opposing perspectives. Participants reported using the **comments** sections to get alternative perspectives on news stories, as well as to help them assess the reliability of news sources.

Becoming more conscious of bias generated mixed outcomes. Most participants reported **no, or little change in how they felt about people who hold alternative opinions** to their own. There were some instances of small **positive shifts in perceptions towards** people who vote for the opposition in the pre-post survey.

In contrast there was only one participant who **further entrenched their view** and had more hostility towards alternative views to their own.

*Part of life is seeing news stories that have different opinions.*  
**Female, 55+**

*I enjoy watching the news but I like how on Facebook I am able to read the comments and see the opinions of other people. Whether I agree or disagree with the comments, in my opinion it's good to see different views. You don't really get that with the live news on TV as they attempt to be 'unbiased'.*  
**Female, 18-34**

*If an issue is personal to you, or something that you have personal experience or knowledge of, and you see other people that show they don't have knowledge but still giving opinion, it can be infuriating.*  
**Male, 18-34**

# Case Study: Taking more control increased trust

Female, 18-34

## Baseline

In the pre-treatment interview, she **felt her news diet was diverse** in terms of the topics consumed but less diverse in range and types of publishers.

She also perceived that the news she sees online wasn't high quality, or very fact-based.

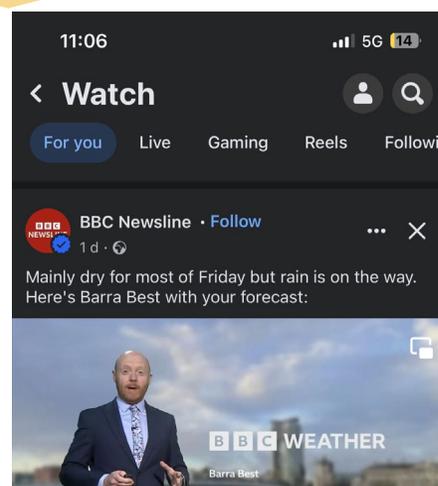
*I wouldn't normally click on this type of news story as the source / creator isn't a reputable news outlet and I wasn't sure of its reliability.*  
(online upload)



## Exposure

She amended her news diet by **tailoring the pages she follows** on Facebook. For example, she unfollowed a Glasgow news outlet (which was bringing up Scottish news, when the participant lived in Northern Ireland). She also realised the pages followed and the **'For You' section provided a more tailored experience**.

*I'm going to go onto pages of things that I follow. Then I might get things that are a bit more relevant to me.*  
(online upload)



## Impact

Took control of their newsfeed and blocked posts from some news providers. Also filtered news content to topics they enjoyed, e.g. nature. Having personalised her local news choices, she felt her trust in her local news outlets had been enhanced. When looking at actual change in the newsfeed, 6 different news sources (with BBC and Belfast Live seen the most) were seen pre-treatment. This increased to 21 and included more local news such as The Irish News and Belfast Telegraph.

*I definitely feel a bit more empowered in terms of having a bit more control over what I don't consume. For example, seeing less of pages and blocking certain news articles and sort of filtering down.*  
(post-treatment interview)



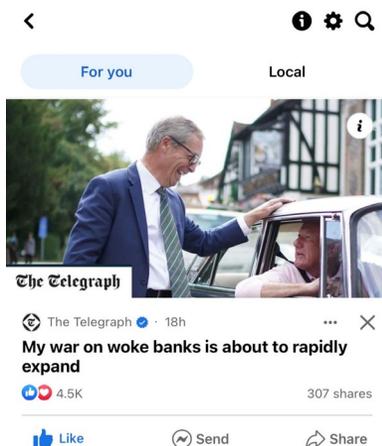
# Case Study: Increased personalisation creates desire for news of interest

Male, 18-34

## Baseline

Enjoyed the breadth of news sources he consumed on Facebook, and the ability to see breaking news. Frequently read comments on news stories, to see perspectives on different topical events. Main news interests were sports and current affairs.

*I have liked this article as I agree with Farage and that his account shouldn't have been closed regarding politics - main reason Allison Rose (CEO of NatWest) has resigned. (online upload)*



## Exposure

The outlet review was conducted based on reliability and interest to his. He dropped York Eve Post which had topics he was less interested in; subscribed to BBC News for politics which he trusted more. And followed the 'I' which had good coverage of 'space'.

*I now see a little less politics [than I used to] because I've been reacting and engaging with more interest stories, and so they [interest stories] now appear in higher volume.*

Weekly average of York Eve Post seen pre-treatment<sup>1</sup>: **11**

Weekly average of BBC seen pre-treatment: **66**

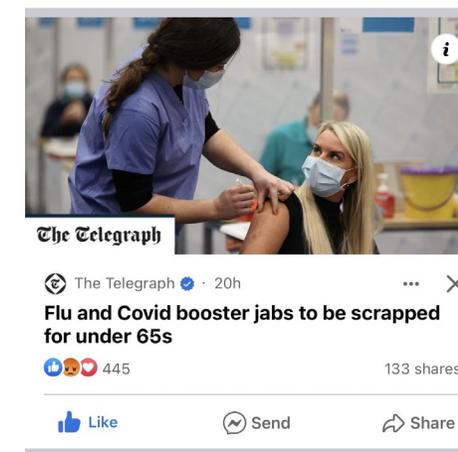
Weekly average of York Eve Post seen post-treatment: **3**

Weekly average of BBC seen post-treatment: **99**

## Impact

The impact of the review was positive resulting in an increase in news stories of interest. However, the proportion of stories he wanted to see on current affairs / politics appeared to reduce. There was also some frustration at comments from those who held different views.

*It's nice to have a contrasting perspective, but comments on Facebook are more uneducated. I can take it on sport, but when commenting on migrant lives without research I get a bit angry and upset. I see fewer stories on politics but more stories that I care and am passionate about.*



<sup>1</sup> Seen within the period that OCR was used (i.e. around 5 minutes per day or 35 minutes a week)

# Cohort 4 - Trust Score Browser Extension



Cohort made up of those who **do not currently use trust score browser extensions**. Cohort made up of a mix of those who consume news from **alternative/non-mainstream** media organisations and those consuming **mainstream** news sources.



Cohort were asked to download the trust score browser extension NewsGuard.\*

\* NewsGuard provides a subscription service which gives users 'trust scores' out of 100 for different news outlets when browsing news online. These scores are based on a set list of criteria, including whether a news outlet clarifies errors or makes advertising clear (for more information see: [NewsGuard - Transparent Reliability Ratings for News and Information Sources \(newsguardtech.com\)](https://www.newsguardtech.com/news-guard-transparent-reliability-ratings-for-news-and-information-sources))

# Overview of Key Outcomes

## Direct effect of treatment for participants: use of trust scores

- Participants **generally valued the trust scores**, finding them informative for checking their existing news diet as well as sources they did not already use.
- However, most felt that a subscription to access trust scores did not have long term benefits, as they generally stick to the same group of trusted sources, and scores do not change over time.
- Some felt they might be more tempted to use trust scores in future if the ratings were updated more regularly, or if scores were assigned to individual news stories rather than the outlets as a whole.



## Impact on engagement with news

- Despite the participants finding the trust scores informative, this generally did not lead to any changes in participants' news diets on Facebook, as it **mostly reinforced** positive **views of existing** sources and negative views of sources not currently used.
- In some instances, it led to participants being more open to reading news stories from sources they had not previously considered reliable.
- For a few participants, some of their existing sources scored lower than expected, but this did not lead them to stop using that source – rather to continue using it but treat it with more scepticism in future.



## Impact on knowledge, trust and polarisation

- Use of the trust scores helped to increase participants' **confidence in the trustworthiness** of the news they receive on Facebook.
- However, this did not extend to a wider increase in **trust** in news in general, as participants only felt more trusting of the news sources that they had specifically checked the trust scores for.
- Due to the lack of changes made to participants' news diets as a result of the trust scores, **no changes** were observed in terms of how **informed** or **polarised** participants felt as a result of the treatment.

## Participants generally thought trust scores could be informative

Before the treatment, participants generally relied upon a small group of trusted news sources. Participants shared prior strategies for assessing the trustworthiness of news, including **checking multiple sources** for a story and reading **comment sections**.

Participants had **little awareness of trust score tools** before the treatment, although they generally felt that trust scores could be informative. However, some participants wanted to check the **reliability of the scoring system** beforehand, seeking out reviews to check who provided the scores and how they were calculated.

It is worth noting that some participants who used their mobile phone to browse news felt it would have been more helpful if the trust scores appeared within their Facebook news feed, like it did on the desktop version. This meant for participants to engage with the trust scores on mobile, they needed to separately use the NewsGuard app to look up news outlets' scores. Some had some difficulties identifying the right news sources with this method.

*If I saw something on Facebook that I didn't think was true, first I'd look at the comments section to see what everyone else is saying about it and then I might do some research on it to see what is happening. But generally, I do believe it and trust what is written in the newspapers online. I have a trust that they are telling the truth.*

Female, 55+

*Yeah I think that they [trust scores] would help me more around being sceptical about everything. I would think if its got 'X' amount of ratings it might be more factual so probably it would help me trust it more.*

Female 18-34

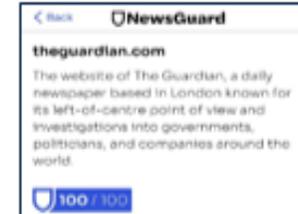
*I think it would be eye opening. trust scores, I trust most things so I think it would be eye opening for me if it came up with a lower score for something I think is fact.*

Female 35-54

# Participants generally responded to the trust scores with either reassurance or surprise

Participants generally felt **reassured** when seeing the scores of **familiar and trusted sources**, as these scores were often high. This helped confirm for participants that their existing news diet was reliable and trustworthy. Sometimes this also worked in the reverse, where participants saw low trust scores for sources they did not use often or trust. In these instances, participants said the low trust score made them even less likely to interact with those sources in the future.

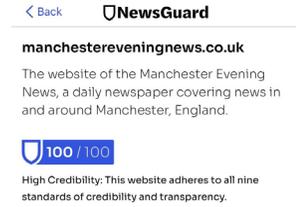
Participants were generally **surprised** on the occasions where a **source received a higher or lower score than anticipated**. On occasions, this was seen as a positive and made them more open to using the source in the future. For other participants, where a source previously deemed untrustworthy received a higher score than anticipated, or a higher score than sources the participants trusted, this created doubt in the scoring processes.



Rating on 16/8/2023

*The Guardian trust scores don't surprise me. I always find it well written, so doesn't surprise me. Always drawn to Guardian articles.*

**Female, 35-54**



Rating on 8/8/2023

*As I get the majority of my news from the MEN I was pleased to see they are 100% trustworthy.*

**Male, 55+**



Rating on 19/8/2023

*This score is surprising for me as I wouldn't usually view Channel 4 as overly trustworthy. Although, there's no rationale for this. Goes to show that it's worth checking out news sources before making a decision on what the reality of something is.*

**Female, 18-34**

*I was surprised to see this [GB News] was so high as they seem to have such a right-wing bias.*

**Male, 55+**

**Outcome:**  
Little change to news diets

# Participants did not generally make changes to their news diet as a result of the trust scores

Participants generally felt that a news source was trustworthy and could be used again if it **scored at least 80/100**. They felt this meant that the source had only lost out on points for some minor issues. This mostly served to validate pre-existing views about trusted sources.

For familiar sources, **60/100** was also viewed by some as an acceptable score, so long as participants bore the lower score in mind when using it. This included the *Daily Mail* (64.5), with one participant saying the score did not put them off using it in the future as they used it for showbiz news, which they knew to take with a “pinch of salt”. Therefore, lower scores did not generally lead to news sources being read less often or by fewer people, merely the level to which they were trusted.

A few participants reflected that **the criteria a news source lost points for was of more importance** than the overall score. For example, one participant reflected that she was okay with a source losing points for not declaring details about their ownership, as she felt that did not relate to the trustworthiness of the news it provided.

NewsGuard  
dailymail.co.uk  
publication of the Daily Mail, a major British tabloid. The site publishes a mix of original content and stories from the Daily Mail and Mail on Sunday.  
64.5 / 100  
Credible with Exceptions: This website generally maintains basic standards of credibility and transparency—with significant exceptions.  
Does not repeatedly publish false content (22 points)  
Gathers and presents information responsibly (18)  
Regularly corrects or clarifies errors (12.5)  
Handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly (12.5)  
Avoids deceptive headlines (10)  
Website discloses ownership and financing (7.5)  
Clearly labels advertising (7.5)  
Reveals who's in charge, including any possible conflicts of interest (5)  
The site provides names of content creators.

Rating on 23/8/2023

*I didn't see any news sources that had less than 50% accuracy. I assume anything with less than that wouldn't make it to your top stories on Facebook if they're less trusted.*

Female, 18-34

*The Daily Record... lost... points, for 'reveals who is in charge'. What has that got to do with me reading the news? They got all the full points for what is important to me. The big one that affected me was 'handles the difference between news and opinion responsibly'. If they lost points for that, that is the whole thing about news stories - it is fact.*

Female 35-54

**Outcome:**  
Limited  
change in  
feeling  
informed

# Participants reported no change in how well informed they felt about current affairs and politics as a result of the trust scores

Given the increased reassurance in sources they already used, participants were **not generally exposed to more, or different, information or perspectives** through the use of trust scores.

Participants **already felt quite informed from their Facebook feeds**, therefore with reassurance from trust scores that their Facebook feed showed them mostly legitimate news, they saw little need to seek out more information. Likewise, they therefore saw little change in the variety of news following the treatment phase, as they were making few changes to their Facebook feed.

Participants often felt that the issue with the news on their Facebook feed was **lack of diversity of topics and opinions, rather than trust**, which they felt trust scores could not have assisted with. In some instances, participants were fine with this as they rather not want to see their Facebook become dominated by “serious” news. Some also did not want to see alternative perspectives on the news issues that matter most to them.

*I wouldn't say much has changed since using NewsGuard, I don't really think there was much that needed to change.*

**Male, 55+**

*I certainly became a lot more aware in the last four weeks of what news I was I wasn't looking at.*

**Male, 55+**

## Trust scores helped increase trust in chosen news outlets, but not in the news industry as a whole

Participants often said that, through using the trust scores, they had greater confidence in determining trustworthy and reliable news sources. This is reflected in pre-post survey data, which saw an increase in the number of participants agreeing that **news on their Facebook was high quality and based on facts**.

However, this increase in trust on news on Facebook **did not extend to a wider boost in perceptions of trust in news in general**. The use of trust scores reinforced participants' faith in their existing favourite news sources, but did little to address their trust in news sources that they had not specifically sought out trust scores for.

*It was good initially to see how the main news pages I tend to look at ranked.*

**Male, 34-55**

*I definitely feel that I've got a better idea of how reliable my newsfeed is generally. I would say that I'm more trusting of going to Facebook now for my news.*

**Male, 34-55**

*It has made me think and it will make me think in the future a bit more about is this credible? Is this something which I would trust or not?*

**Female 18-34**

## Most participants felt trust scores lacked long-term value to news consumers

While participants felt that seeing the trust scores were valuable, a majority of participants saw little long-term value of using trust scores, stating they were **unlikely to continue using them**. Even those that said they would continue to use them questioned **how often the scores would be updated**, for them to remain relevant and useful. Participants did not notice any changes to any individual trust ratings during the treatment.

Participants explained that trust scores could be used in a short-period of time, to review all the sources they were familiar with and used most frequently, and then the trust score tool could be removed.

A few participants also questioned whether it would be more effective if trust scores were **specific to individual news stories**, or had a **fact-checker function**, rather than the publisher as a whole. They felt that some otherwise trustworthy news sources may publish a misleading article and the trust scores would not pick this up.

*[I'd] see how often they evaluate sources in the future. People would cancel if it doesn't update.*

**Female, 18-34**

*I don't think I'd think to use NewsGuard. I'd stay with my thoughts on a story based on what I've read.*

**Female, 18-34**

# Case Study: Little change to news diet

## Aged 18-34

### Baseline

They relied upon a core group of sources including their local newspaper and two national broadcasters, that their family traditionally used. They were sceptical of other news sources and felt they weren't very trustworthy. They felt a tool like trust scores could be useful and compared it to other reviewing systems that help provide information.

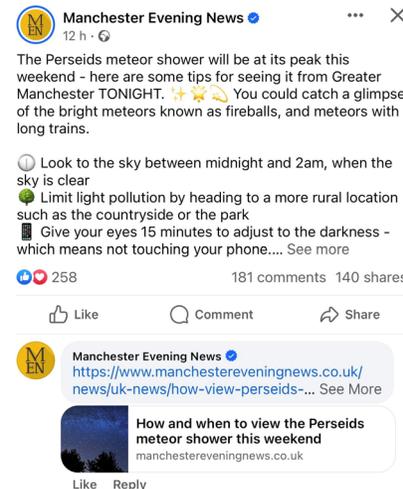
*It would help me more in terms of always being so sceptical about everything. I would think if it said it [a source] had X amount of ratings, it might make you think it is more factual, so I would trust it.*  
(baseline interview)



### Experience

During the treatment phase, they searched for sources they used regularly. They found that their **most frequently used sources received high scores**. They found this **reassuring** and felt that it reinforced their previously held beliefs. They also saw some sources that they did not wholly trust get lower scores, reinforcing their prior judgements on them. However, a small number of sources received better than expected ratings, which surprised them.

*I was surprised at some of the ratings but was happy that the ones I tend to look for like MEN, BBC and Granada all seem to be quite good ratings.*  
(post-treatment interview)

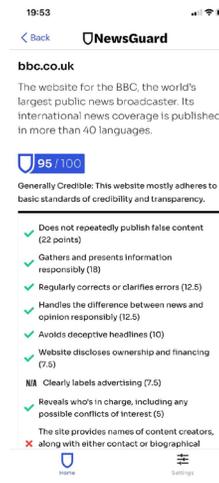


### Impact

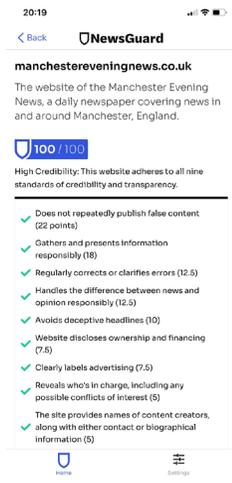
They felt that trust scores validated their previous strategies in judging the trustworthiness of news. They therefore **made limited changes to their news diet**, as they felt reassured that their **existing core group of news sources were trustworthy**. As a result of these limited changes, introducing trust scores had a limited impact on wider potential impacts such as polarisation or feeling informed.

*I've learned that, in terms of my interactions on Facebook, the main stories don't relate to me too much, and whether that's the way I am?*  
(post-treatment interview)

#### Rating on 3/8/2023



#### Rating on 3/8/2023



# Case Study: Increased engagement with trusted sources, reduced trust in other sources

Female, 35-54

## Baseline

They were fairly trusting of news they saw on Facebook, but did have some doubts. They found the COVID period for news quite overwhelming, due to both the frequency of updates and the depressing, and sometimes contradictory, nature of them. This led them to reduce their news consumption and therefore they did not feel very informed about national policies and issues. They felt trust scores would be valuable for understanding the reliability of different sources.

*If there is a big story, in my way of assessing I'd check other sources. If it was on them I'd know it's big enough for them to be covering. Or if it came up on Twitter from people, I'd know to trust it (baseline interview)*

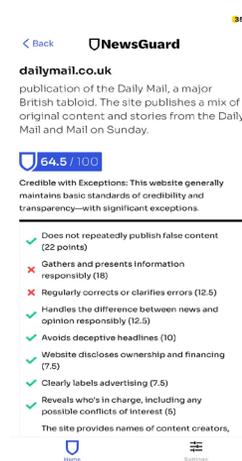


## Experience

After overcoming some technical difficulties to access the app, they embraced the trust scores. It quickly became **part of their browsing routine**, and they used it to search for familiar sources like the BBC, EdinburghLive, and the Daily Mail. They expressed some **surprise at small, local news scoring much higher than established large newspapers** like the Telegraph. They also reflected on her use of the Daily Mail, which scored 64/100 and whether they should look at other sites for the celebrity news they read there.

*Every time I see the 64 it does make me think that I should look up this article on another site to get their perspective on it! (online upload)*

Rating on 22/8/2023

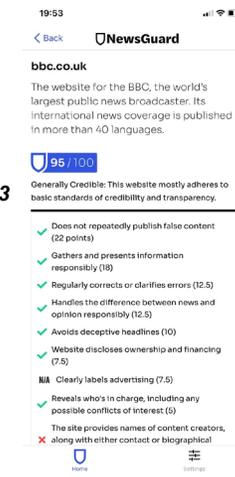


## Impact

They **found trust scores valuable** and felt they had a better understanding of how trustworthy sources were. They said they therefore planned to continue using them once the research ended; however, this depended on the cost and the frequency of updates. In addition, their pre-post survey data suggested that they became **slightly less trusting of news on Facebook** – possibly linked to the fact that some of their main news sources, such as the Daily Mail and the Sun, were amongst the lowest scored sources they saw.

*It did make me think about the stories and think, could this be seen in a different way? How have they embellished the story? Is there some sort of fact to it? (post-treatment interview)*

Rating on 21/8/2023



# Case Study: Little change in being informed

## Female, 35-54

### Baseline

She had previously closed their Facebook account as she felt she had become stuck with a less diverse newsfeed. She liked the authenticity and **'real' opinions on Facebook**, but mentioned she found it **difficult to know how to trust sources or judge which were reliable.**

*I might react to things, but I generally don't comment. I tend to keep my comments to myself. Or I can talk to people in person about things like that.*  
(baseline interview)

### Experience

She liked the idea of seeing trust scores, but had some hesitation in installing the software. Thus, she checked reviews which gave her reassurance it was legitimate. After a burst of activity to check the sources she used most often, checking the app **became embedded as part of her news routine.** Seeing the scores did not necessarily lead her to follow or unfollow sources, but she felt more informed and able to judge articles.

*I had just kind of by accident been clicking on a lot of ITV. I've been clicking on a lot of their articles just because the articles themselves were interesting and I hadn't even really noticed that they were from the same source.*  
(post-treatment interview)

### Impact

She said after the treatment, she felt **more able to judge the reliability of her own news diet** and other different sources. However, her response in the pre-post survey suggested she felt less trusting of news she saw on Facebook overall, and less informed on key issues like politics, the economy and immigration.

*I would say that I've just become more aware of my habits and consumption habits on Facebook and off of Facebook as well. But I wouldn't say that anything is necessarily changed from it.*  
(post-treatment interview)

